

Note on the Lepchas of Sikkim. By A. CAMPBELL, Esq. Superintendent of Dorjeling.

When I had the honor some months ago of forwarding a few Notes on the Mech tribe,* I ventured to announce my expectation of being able to furnish some particulars of other tribes inhabiting the neighbouring countries of eastern Nipal, Sikkim, and Bootan. To this end, I had collected and recorded some useful memoranda regarding the Lepchas, Bhotiahs, Limboos, Murmis, Gurungs, and Hains, all mountaineers, which by an unfortunate accident were destroyed by fire; nevertheless, as the establishment of this Sanatarium for our countrymen affords them opportunities of communicating with classes of men which have hitherto been denied to all except the few who under very restrictive circumstances have sojourned in Nipal, I am induced to forward some particulars of the Lepchas, with an alphabet and very meagre vocabulary of their language, in the hope that they may be of some assistance to persons visiting this place, who may have leisure and a disposition to acquire the means of colloquial and written intercourse in their own language, with a most interesting people, and I believe the undoubted aborigines of the mountain forests surrounding Dorjeling.

Although the Lepchas have a written language, it has not been ascertained that they now have, or ever did possess any recorded history of themselves, or chronicles of any important events in which they have taken part. The "Lepchas," so called by us, and indeed by themselves in conversation with strangers, are divided into two races, viz. "Rong" and "Khámbá." Rong in colloquial intercourse among them is a generic term, and equivalent to "Lepcha" with us. But a man who announces himself a Lepcha to an European, Nipalese, or Hindoostani, may, on being questioned, turn out to be a Khámbá. The real Lepcha, or Rong proper, has no tradition whatever, so far as I can learn, connected with the advent of his tribe into this part of the world. Here he has always been, to the best of his knowledge and belief, and this is corroborated by all his neighbours. The habitant of the Lepchas occupies an extreme

* Vide As. Soc. Journ. No. 92.

extent of about 120 miles from north-west to south-east, along the southern face of the Himalaya; to the west, the Tambar branch of the Koori bounds it; but on the east its limits are undefined in the mountains of Bootan. Thus they are found among the subjects of eastern Nipal, throughout the whole of Sikkim, and extending an unknown distance into Bootan. I believe however that they are found in very small numbers indeed further east than fifty miles beyond the Teestah, although a few of them are said to be located as far east as Punnuka, and Tassgong.*

The Khámbá although now the same in all essentials of language, customs, and habits, as the Rong, is professedly, and undoubtedly, an emigrant from beyond the Himalaya. They state themselves to have come from a province of China, called Khám, which is described as lying to the east and north of Lhassa, about thirty days' journey. This province has not been very long annexed to the Chinese empire, and if the accounts I have heard from members of the Nipalese Missions to Pekin are to be relied on, its rulers and inhabitants are even now far from being well governed and peaceable subjects of the celestial dynasty. They are represented as a herd of lawless thieves and robbers, through whose country it is scarce safe to travel, even when under the protection of an escort from the Court of Pekin.

The Khámbás reckon seven generations since their arrival on this side the snows, which may be computed at 200 years. They were headed by the first ancestor of the present Sikkim Raja, who is himself a Khámbá. Previous to the arrival of the Khámbás, it is said that great confusion existed among the Lepcha and Bhotia aborigines of Sikkim, in consequence of the incessant struggles for supremacy between their chiefs; they however had priests (Lamas) from Paling Goombah, beyond the snows, whose advice was often followed in temporal matters, and when it appeared to these learned leaders that it was hopeless to quiet dissensions by ordinary means, they suggested that a Raja should be sought for in some distant

* Towns in Bootan; see Pemberton's report.

country, to whom all classes should tender allegiance. This was agreed to, and a deputation of Lamas proceeded into Thibet Pote-leang, in search of a fitting ruler for Sikkim; here they were unsuccessful, and passed on to Kham-leang,* where, after much trouble, they discovered a boy, the son of respectable parents, whose horoscope was considered auspicious; he was offered the Sikkim crown, it was accepted, and attended by his Khámbá clansmen was brought from beyond the snows, and proclaimed Raja of Dinjong (Lepcha for the Sikkim country).

The first Raja although chosen for the office in a similar manner to that adopted in the election of fresh incarnations of deceased Lamas, did not exercise any spiritual authority over his people; the Lamas who brought him to the throne retained this in their own hands for some time, but not long after the spiritual power came into the family of the Raja, where it still continues. At present, the eldest son of the Raja is a Lama and high priest of the kingdom, a younger son being nominated heir apparent to the throne.

The Khámbás although a Trans-Himalayan tribe, and hence by us generally denominated Bhotiahs, or Thibetans, consider themselves included in that generic appellation; but the following distinctions are made by the Lepchas in talking of people who are called Bhotiahs by Europeans—the Bhotiah from beyond the snows is “Pote,” and his country “Pote-leang;” he of Sikkim “Arratt,” and his country “Dinjong;” and he of Bootan is denominated “Proh-murroh,” or man of Proh.

The Lepchas, Khámbás, and Lepchas proper, to be understood as included under this term, are Bhuddhists, following the priests of Thibet and those of their own tribe indiscriminately; the former from being generally educated at religious establishments of repute, are considered the more orthodox, the latter rarely go beyond the snows to study, when they do, they derive the full advantages of the superior consideration accorded to the Thibetans, provided they adhere to the strict rules of monachism. Marriage is permitted to the native Lepcha priest,

* “Leang,” country or province.

and he is counted as a good match for the daughters of the chiefs. The influence of the priests is considerable, but it is far short of that attained by those of Bootan over the Bhotiahs, as described by Captain Pemberton, and the majority of them are obliged, and not ashamed, to relinquish a dependence on alms for the more active employments of agriculture and trade.

Restrictions of Hindooism as to caste are not admitted by the Lepchas, although those who live under the Nipal government are obliged to conform to the Hindoo laws of that state, this however they do with a very bad grace, and rarely forego an opportunity of crossing into Sikkim, or coming to Dorjeling, to indulge their beef-eating propensities. They are gross feeders, eating all kinds of animal food, including the elephant, rhinoceros, and monkey, and all grains and vegetables known to us, with the addition of many roots and plants altogether excluded from our culinary list. Pork is their most favourite flesh, next to that, beef, goat, mutton. The yâk is considered the best beef, next to that the flesh of the Sikkim cow (a fine animal) and last, the Bengalli and common cow. All birds are included in their list of eatable game; of the carrion of wild animals that of the elephant is most prized. The favourite vegetable food is rice, next to it wheat, barley, maize, millet, murwa, and a fine species of yam called "bookh," which grows all over these mountains, at elevations of from 1500 to 3000 feet. During the rains when grain is scarce they contentedly put up with ferns, bamboo roots, several sorts of fungi, and innumerable succulent plants found wild on the mountains. Fond of fermented and spirituous liquors, they are nevertheless not given to drunkenness; their common drink is a kind of beer made from the fermented infusion of Indian corn and murwa, which is weak, but agreeably acid, and very refreshing. This is drunk at all times when procurable, and when making a journey it is carried in a large bamboo chungu, and diligently applied to throughout the day. They have no distilled liquor of their own, but they greatly admire and prize all our strong waters, our port and sherry, cherry brandy, and maraschino. Tea is a favourite beverage, the black sort brought from China in large cakes being that preferred; it is prepared by boiling, after which the decoction

is churned up in a chungu with butter and salt; milk is never taken with tea.

Their cooking is careless, coarse, and not cleanly. Rice is generally boiled, when travelling, in pieces of the large bamboo, at home in coarse iron pots. Vegetables are always boiled, in oil, when the latter is procurable, and spiced with capsicum and ginger, of which these hills possess very fine kinds. Salt is not a commonly used condiment, the chief source of supply until lately being Thibet, whence rock salt is brought on men's backs; the easier communication with the plains of Bengal by the new Dorjeling road admits of the importation of this article at a cheaper rate, and sea salt is rapidly taking the place of the other.

The Lepcha dress is simple, handsome, and graceful. It consists of a robe of striped red and white cotton cloth crossed over the breast and shoulders, and descending to the calf of the leg, leaving the arms bare; a loose jacket of red cotton cloth is worn over the robe by those who can afford it, and both are bound round the waist by a red girdle; some strings of coloured beads round the neck, silver and coral earrings, a bamboo bow and quiver of iron-pointed arrows, and a long knife, complete the dress of the men. The knife, called *Bán* by the Lepchas, and *Chipsá* by the Bhotiahs, is constantly worn by the males of all ages and ranks; it hangs on the right side, suspended from the left shoulder, and is used for all purposes. With the *Bán* the Lepcha clears a space in the forest for his house and cultivation; it is the only tool used by him in building; with it he skins the animals who fall a prey to his snares and arrows, it is his sword in battle, his table knife, his hoe, spade, and nail parer. Without the *Bán* he is helpless to move in the jungles; with it, he is a man of all work; no wonder then that the expertness with which it is used by the boys of a few years old even, should be the astonishment of strangers.

The women are less handsomely dressed than the men; a piece of plain unbleached cotton cloth, or the cloth of the castor oil insect, rolled round to form a sort of petticoat, with a loose bedgown of the same, and a profusion of mock

coral and coloured bead necklaces, form their entire wardrobe. They are the domestic and farm drudges of the men, performing all out- and in-door work along with their husbands, and much besides. It is not unusual to meet a stout and active man bow in hand, sauntering along the road followed by his wife and sisters heavily loaded with grain or merchandise. It is the delight of a Lepcha to be idle, he abhors the labour of practising any craft, but he expects that while he is amused and unemployed, the female part of the household shall be busily engaged in the field, or in looking after the pigs and poultry.

Marriages among the Lepchas are not contracted in childhood, as among the Hindoos, nor do the men generally marry young. This arises mainly from the difficulty of procuring means of paying the parents of the bride the expected *douceur* on giving the suitor his daughter to wife; this sum varies from 40 rupees to 400, or 500, according to the rank of the parties. It is not customary to allow the bride to leave her parents' home for that of her husband until the sum agreed on has been paid in full; hence, as the consummation of the marriage is permitted while the female is still under her father's roof, it is by no means uncommon to find the husband the temporary bondsman of his father-in-law, who exacts, Jewish fashion, labour from his son, in lieu of money, until he shall have fairly won his bride.

The women are not strictly bound to chastity previous to marriage, although any injury to the matrimonial bed is punished by beating and divorcement. Children born out of wedlock belong to the mother.

The Lepchas intermarry with the Limboos and Bhotiahs, and the offspring of such unions become members of the father's tribe, without any disqualification whatever.

The Lepchas, like true Buddhists, bury their dead, although the Murmis, a Buddhist tribe and inhabiting the same country, burn their corpses first, and afterwards bury the ashes. The presence of death in a hamlet is always regarded with temporary horror, and the house he has visited is almost always forsaken by the surviving inmates; fevers and small-pox are considered alike contagious and greatly dreaded. On the appear-

ance of the latter in a village it is deserted by the young and strong whose relatives are not attacked, and nothing will induce a Lepcha from another part of the country to visit an infected village. Vaccination is already greatly prized by these people, for which fortunate circumstance we are indebted to Doctor Pearson's success in introducing it among them; its preservative blessings are eagerly sought for at Dorjeling by them, and the Bhotiahs from remote parts of Nipal and Sikkim.

Goitre is known among them, but is by no means common; among 200 persons at this place now, I can find but one goitred individual, and that is a woman. Ophthalmia is I think very uncommon, and syphilis rarely met with. During fifteen months residence, I have seen one case of leprosy only in a Lepcha, and although the mountainous nature of their country renders the climate sufficiently damp and cold, rheumatism seems to be a rare disease; on the whole they are decidedly exempt from many of the ills which flesh is certain heir to in the most favoured countries of the globe. Consumption I have never met with, nor liver disease, nor dysentery, nor do they know the cholera by name even. These four scourges of Europe and India find no food to feed on among the Lepchas.

In person the Lepchas are short, averaging about five feet in height; five feet six is tall, and four feet eight is a common stature among the men. The women are short in the usual proportion. The men are bulky for their height, but rather fleshy, than sinewy. The muscular development of their limbs is greatly inferior to that of the Magars, Gurungs, Murmis, and other Purbottiahs. They are very fair of skin, and boys and girls in health have generally a ruddy tinge of complexion; this is lost however in adolescence, although the fairness continues. The features are markedly Mongolian, but there is a fulness and roundness of feature, accompanied by a cheerful expression and laughing eye, which renders the face a most pleasing one. The total absence of beard, and the fashion of parting the hair along the crown of the head, adds to a somewhat womanly expression of countenance in the men, and the loose bed-gown sort of jacket with wide sleeves which they wear, contributes still more to render it rather difficult for strangers to distinguish the sexes,

especially in middle age. The men very often look like women, and the women sometimes like men. The hair is worn long by both sexes, the younger men allowing it to hang loose over the shoulders, the elders plaiting it into a tail, which sometimes reaches to the knees. The women of station wear their hair in two, and sometimes in three tails, tying it with braid and silken cords and tassels. The Lepchas, both male and female, are dirty in person, rarely having recourse to ablution. In the cold and dry season this renders them unpleasant inmates of a close dwelling, but in the rains, when they move about and are frequently wet, they are passably clean and sweet.

The temperament of the Lepcha is eminently cheerful, and his disposition really amiable. In ordinary intercourse they are a very fascinating people, and possess an amount of intelligence and rational curiosity not to be met with among their Bhotiah, Limboo, Murmi, or Gurung neighbours, and indeed rarely if ever to be seen among people so completely secluded from foreign intercourse as they always have been. The marked contrast in these respects with the listless, uninquiring native of the plains, renders association with them a source of much pleasure to Europeans. They are wonderfully honest, theft being scarcely known among them; they rarely quarrel among themselves, and I have never seen them strike one another. "Do you ever fight?" was asked of an intelligent Lepcha; "No, never, (was the reply) why should we, all Lepchas are brothers, to fight would be unnatural." For ordinary social purposes of talking, eating, and drinking, they have great unanimity, but for any more important purposes of resistance to oppression, the pursuit of industry, or trade, their confidence in one another is at a very low pitch; they fly bad government rather than resist it, and prefer digging for yams in the jungle, and eating wretchedly innutritious vegetables, to enduring even the ordinary annoyances of working for wages. Although they have been called "a military people," I am disposed to consider them as wholly averse to arms, in the usual acceptance of the term. If it be military to carry a long knife, bow and arrows, yet to eschew the use of them against their fellow creatures, then, are they a military people; if it be not, they are

much more a hunting than a military tribe. I do not mean to insinuate that they are wanting in courage to fight, or that they might not, under English tuition and example, make good soldiers; but only to say, that deprived as they long, or always have been of any union in government, or as subjects of any one state, they have not that spirit of personal enterprise, and disregard of personal danger, which when constantly exhibited gratuitously, or for glory's sake, gives races of men the stamp of military habits.

We have no record of Major Latter's opinion of the Lepchas, who aided him on behalf of Sikkim during the Nipal war, but I have heard since my arrival in this quarter that at Nagri, after the Sikkimites were expelled thence by the Goorkas in 1812 or thereabouts, they proved most troublesome enemies, by their custom of lying in wait in the neighbouring forests for months at a time, and losing no opportunity of carrying off and massacring any luckless Goorkha who happened to stray out of musket range of the stockades. They are pretty good marksmen with the arrow, but do not practise it regularly; they use it poisoned in hunting as well as in war.

The Lepchas are poor agriculturists, their labours in this art being confined to the careless growing of rice, Indian corn, murwa,* and a few vegetables, of which the brinjal, cucumber, and capsicum are the chief. Their habits are incurably erratic, they do not form permanent villages, and rarely remain longer than three years in one place, at the expiration of which they move into a new part of the forest, sometimes near, often distant, and there go through the labour of clearing a space for a house, building a new one, and preparing the ground for a crop. The latter operations consist in cutting down the smaller trees, lopping off the branches of the large ones, which are burnt, and scratching the soil with the Bān, after which, on the falling of a shower of rain, the seed is thrown into the ground.

Their houses are built entirely of bamboo, raised about five feet from the ground, and thatched with the same material, but a smaller species, split up. This roofing is, I believe, pe-

* *Sesamum orientale*.

cular to this part of the country; it is an excellent one, and a roofing of it, especially when exposed to smoke, endures about five years. It has been adopted by us at Dorjeling, and is undoubtedly the most convenient and cheap roof as yet obtainable.

I hope to furnish presently a few memoranda on the Limboos, and crave indulgence as to the defects of this letter, in consideration of the few opportunities which have as yet been offered me of mixing with the Lepchas, beyond a very limited space of country around Dorjeling, and on the Nipal frontier, in the immediate neighbourhood of the Mechi river.

Vocabulary of the Lepcha Language.

fire, mē	grey, tok-took
water, oōng,	ivory, tangmoovik
mud, phūt	a boat, too
wood, kōōng	fish, nghoo
iron, pinjing	a snake, boo
copper, song	bird, pho
silver, kom	tiger, sitong
gold, jere	good, riupa
house, lē	God, rim
man, murrōh	the sun, suchum
woman, aiyoō	moon, lavo
old man, puneom	stars, sohōr
young ditto, phaling	clouds, punbrōōng
ditto woman, phaling yeu	thunder, sungmut
cow, long	lightning, suleop
bull, bop	rain, so
he goat, sarchrōō	snow, sonong
she ditto, sārmoōt	wind, sorum
dog, kūshōō	a river, oong kioong
bitch, kūshōō mot	pool, oong-lup
fowl, heek	mountain, lole
cock, abōō	valley, biongsi
hen, amot	country, leang